

Reading - The Three Sieves

Source Unknown, Taken from “One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World” by Margaret Silf

Janice came rushing in to her grandma’s house. “Gran, Gran, there’s something I’m dying to tell you..”

“Wait a moment,” her grandma broke in, with a wise smile. “Whatever it is you want to tell me, have you shaken it through the three sieves?”

“Three sieves?” Janice asked, amazed.

“Yes, my love. Three sieves! Let’s see whether your story will go through the three sieves. The first sieve is the truth. Have you thought about whether what you are going to tell me is true?”

“Well,” hesitated Janice. “I heard it from someone else, so I’m not absolutely sure...”

“Right,” said Gran. “That was an honest answer. So let’s try it through the second sieve. This is the sieve of goodness. Since what you are going to tell me is not necessarily true, then is it at least something good?”

Janice lowered her eyes. “Well, no,” she admitted. “Not really. In fact, quite the opposite.”

“Well,” the wise gandma continued. “Let’s use the third sieve, and see whether what you are going to tell me, even if neither true nor good, is at least necessary.”

“Well, not exactly necessary...” Janice sank into a thoughtful silence.

“So, “ Gran said, giving Janice an understanding hug, “since what you are were going to tell me is neither true, nor good, nor necessary, I suggest that we bury it deep in the ground of forgetfulness, where it won’t cause any heartache to anyone ever again.”

Sermon – Opening Words

“I don’t like you. And this is where I live.” “I don’t like you either.”

When a story begins like that in church, especially if told in the presence of children, we can be reasonably sure that by the end the two protagonists will have done a 180, realized the folly of their initial words, and become friends destined to live happily ever after. The question in the mind of the adult listener is less how the story will end, but how will we get there. We are used to Hollywood endings in the movies we see, and the fairy tales we select to tell our children.

What if, what if the story of “the new boy on the sidewalk” had been the plot of a French, Czech, or German art film? The ending would have been much less predictable. What if the story had been a true story based in the inner city of Detroit, the South Side of Chicago, or a story of kids in Beirut, Jerusalem, Bagdad, or Mogadishu? The story might have had a very different ending.

“I don’t like you. This is where I live.” Way too often what happens next is for a child to find and join a group of other kids, and perhaps even adults, who feel the same way, who look at the new boys and girls and say: “We don’t like them. This is where we live.”

We don’t like you – you are from Burundi. This is where we live. We don’t like you, you are from Mexico, Guatemala, Somalia, Mississippi, Massachusetts. This is where we live.

What a way to begin a conversation. What a way to start a relationship - for we will relate, the only question is, how. Our opening words matter. Let us be intentional about our opening words.

A few days after we had moved into our house in Bow, the doorbell rang at about 9:30 am. My wife and kids had left to visit the grandparents in Florida and I had stayed up late to unpack boxes and rearrange furniture. This is just to explain why, at 9:30 in the morning, I was still in my PJs. But here I was, and after a slight hesitation, I decided to answer the door. Immediately, I realized that I had made the --- right decision. The mother and daughter standing outside were holding a plate of homemade brownies, still warm from the oven, and they smiled.

I don’t remember what we talked about that morning. It doesn’t really matter. What mattered were their opening words, or opening gestures, that welcomed me and my family to the neighborhood. They set the stage. They gave me encouragement to knock on the doors of my other neighbors later that afternoon.

Now we do the NH wave ---- as we pass each other driving, but we also stop for a chat when we see each other walking. The doors are open thanks to those opening words.

How different from the experience of a seminary friend of mine. A few days after arriving at his new apartment he found a note on the windshield of his car. His car was parked right outside his own home, but the note said: “I wish you didn’t park here. I hope you don’t have a second car.”

Different opening words, very different experience. Our opening words matter.

I like to think that the neighbor from across the street must have had a good reason for that note on the windshield. But these words, however honest and to the point, weren’t opening words. My friend wasn’t ready to hear them, they simply made him sad, a bit mad, and suspicious of his new neighbors.

In our services here at church we are intentional about our opening words, and by that I don’t just mean the segment labeled “Opening Words.” We ring the chime, to allow us to quiet down inside and out. We listen to music and sing music to create a new tone in our own hearts and in the way we are with each other. We light our chalice to signal that this time is special, intentionally different, sacred. And we speak our covenant, all together, to remind each other and ourselves of our aspirations and purpose as a community.

We are intentional about these opening words because we know it takes time to open our hearts to the compassion and love so essential for holding each other as we share our joys and sorrows.

We are intentional about these opening words because we know it takes time to open our mind, heart, and soul to the possibility of challenge by the sermon, to the discomfort of uneasy truths being spoken by the preacher. We are intentional because we need to feel supported by the familiar and comfortable, even as we open ourselves to the new and unnerving.

We are intentional and explicit about opening words in worship, but opening words are no less important when we walk out of this sanctuary. Our opening words matter wherever we get together, whenever we meet.

One of my favorite emails going around a number of years ago spread a list of “Instructions for Life.” The list originally started as advice from a father to his son, as he went off to college. By the time I saw the list, wisdom sayings from around the world, including the Dalai Lama, had been added. I am not sure who wrote what but the list offers advice such as:

- Never interrupt when you are being flattered.
- When you say “I am sorry” look the person in the eye.
- Don’t let a little dispute injure a great friendship, or
- Call you Mom while you can.

But the one instruction I remember most, other than “Call your mom while you can,” is #21. “Smile when picking up the phone. The caller will hear it in your voice.” (2x)

I remember this piece of wisdom because for years I failed at #21. My wife would call me while I was working in my pre-seminary job, and, over and over, she would have to remind me that, once again, my tone of voice had betrayed me. It was far from what it would have been had I done a 21.

I believe I have gotten better over the years – or perhaps my wife just got tired of reminding me. Yet I notice that I now smile more consciously as I answer the phone. I also try to remember to smile before I make a phone call. I find it amazing how this small gesture, usually directed at an empty room, can change how I feel on the inside. My anxiety level drops along with my shoulders. I anticipate the exchange to be pleasant, when moments before I might have dreaded the call. I feel a sense of calm and trust rooted in my awareness that I am calling with good intentions.

Our opening words, they make a difference.

Opening words are often first impressions. They can be hard to erase. Yet we are not stuck with the opening we choose. Once more, the list of “Instructions for Life” offers common sense advice. #20 says: “When you realize you’ve made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.”

Perhaps I am a bit too literal sometimes, but I remember a number of times, after I failed to answer the phone with a “21,” asking my wife: “Would you mind if I hang up -- and then you call again and I promise you a “21” this time.” And each time we did, it opened up a whole new path to where we could go in our conversation, in our day, in our relationship.

I am not saying a smile is always the right “opening word.” What I am saying is that we ought to be intentional about how we enter into the interactions we have, one-on-one, in committee meetings, classes, service projects, and across the various media we use in our lives. We call, we text, we facebook, we email.

Oh, yes, most of us email, regularly and with abandon. We use it to schedule meetings, to share recipes, to discuss ideas, to let friends and family know what we are up to and how we feel -- and a whole lot more. The beauty of email is its speed, the danger of email is its speed. It is easy to forget about “opening words” when the send button is just a mouse-click away.

Sometimes I wish there were a filter that could identify whether my email carried emotional content, the content that might result in an emotional reaction by those reading my email. I wish that filter would then remind me to take a walk or look out the window for a few minutes.

Then I could come back and read my email again, this time with an eye to the opening words I chose and the impact those words are likely to have on the dialog my email will set in motion.

Our opening words matter. Let us be intentional about our opening words.

Committee meetings may not be worship, yet we need to give ourselves the time to become fully present, to fine tune our attitude, to open ourselves to dialog. Then transformative work can happen.

Classes and service projects may not be worship, yet we need to give ourselves the space to arrive as our best selves, to fine tune our mindset, to open ourselves to dialog. Then transformative learning can happen.

Our personal spiritual practices may differ from communal worship, yet we owe it to ourselves to be intentional about how we set the stage as we reach for spiritual depth.

Our gestures, facial expressions, body postures, they all matter. They are a part of our opening words. They matter because they are a reflection of our values and our faith. They matter because they allow us to do the work we are called to do in this world.

So, as we get ready for our next meeting, class, project, phone call, or email, let us imagine another set of three sieves, a set of sieves designed for opening words.

Let us imagine a first sieve that checks our words for how welcoming and inclusive they are. Do they make it clear that all those present are equally welcome and valued.

Let us imagine a second sieve that checks to see whether our opening words prepare us for dialog, and dialog defined as communication between people truly willing to change their positions as a result of the exchange. Convincing others that we are right and they are wrong is not dialog. Opening words that discourages open exchange will not fit through this sieve.

Finally, let us imagine a third sieve that tests our words for relevance. Do our opening words recognize who is here and why we are here? Opening words relevant to a training session of Sunday School teachers will not necessarily be relevant to the youth group as it prepares to go on a service trip to help the homeless.

Our opening words, they matter. What they need to look like and whether they fit through our three sieves is for each of us to decide. Let us be intentional about our opening words.

Amen.